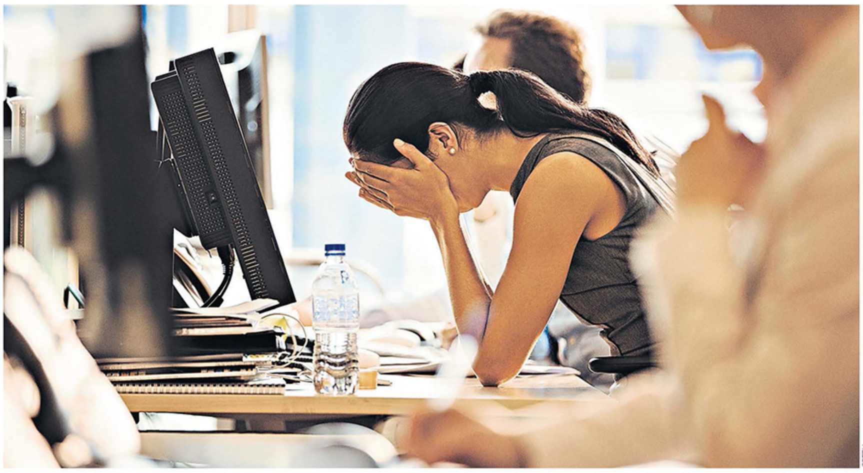
Why is anxiety the new epidemic of our age?

With new reports saying it is worse than depression, how can we tackle the 'nameless dread', asks *Louise Chunn*



Anxiety affects mainly women and people under 35

Everybody feels anxious at some point in their lives: starting a new job, trying to impress a date, sitting an exam, we expect to feel agitated and nervous, the butterflies fluttering in our stomachs. But for those suffering from anxiety or panic disorders such feelings are much stronger and more frequent. There is usually a sense of danger or threat, of not being able to cope with what might happen. Or it could be more of an "irrational" fear or what some call "nameless dread" that can take in every catastrophe imaginable.

People have been getting anxious about anxiety for a while now. Everyone, it seems, is talking about the A word, from Lena Dunham's character in *Girls*, struggling with obsessive compulsive disorder, to the *Telegraph*'s Bryony Gordon, who writes about in her new memoir *Mad Girl*.

And anxiety is more harmful than we may want to admit, according to a major University of Cambridge report, published last week in the medical journal *Brain and Behavior*. More than eight million people in the UK suffer some sort of anxiety disorder, and women and people under 35 are especially affected.

I know this personally. I had a panic attack one summer holiday in the late Nineties. I was driving in France, with my young children in the back of the car, when I suddenly felt my heart rate accelerate and my feet and hands began to sweat profusely. I thought I was about to die. For the next 10 years even the word "motorway" would trigger anxious thoughts, sweating palms and a racing heart.

We respond to perceived threats, just as our ancestors did when hunting for food was a life-threatening activity. These days our brains will still default to "fight, flight or freeze" when faced with danger, which causes our cortisol levels to rise to unhealthy levels.

"These reactions are instinctive," explains therapist Sue Cowan-Jenssen, "they aren't the result of conscious thought." The symptoms, though, feel very real. People suffering from anxiety disorders often experience irritability, dizziness, nervousness and they sleep badly; they may get breathless, sweaty, shake and have nausea and diarrhoea as their bodies respond to the cortisol washing through them. At work, they might steer clear of confrontation, or shy away from taking on anything difficult in case they fail. Socially they may opt out of arrangements at the last minute, assuming that no-one will want to talk to them.

Therapist Hilda Burke reports that people can also end up simply "fearing the fear". She's seen this with clients who are doing well with their therapeutic treatment but can't stop themselves thinking: what will happen if the anxiety returns? "This type of anxiety is actually the most threatening of all because it often appears when everything seems positive, and as such it can be extremely destabilising."

Until now conversations around mental health have tended to focus on depression, but the report last week, which was a review of 48 studies from across the world, suggested anxiety could be a much bigger problem. The US scored the highest number of people affected by anxiety – eight in 100 – while in East Asia the figure was three in 100. It found that more than 60 million people were affected by anxiety disorders every year in the EU.

People with anxiety tend to be hyper-vigilant to negativity and worry excessively about the future, whereas those with depression tend to dwell on bad things about themselves. Many researchers now believe that a lack of dopamine – linked to reward and pleasure – is related to depression, but not anxiety.

But the big question is why it is becoming such an issue now, specifically affecting those born since 1980. One theory is that while we are digitally connected, we are less connected to each other. Daily life is also less communal and collaborative, particularly when compared with life a few hundred years ago. And yet, we all want to be accepted and liked. Being excluded from a group to which they want to belong is a real terror for many young people today. Millennials may call it FOMO (fear of missing out) but it is also fear of being left out.

'I was driving back from France with my children when my first panic attack struck'

Added to this are millennials' fears about the future: will they be able to find a good job, afford to live independently, buy their own homes, so they too can have marriages and families like their parents did?

So what can be done to alleviate anxiety? Therapy is where I turned. First I dealt with my fear of motorways by seeing a Harley Street hypnotherapist for five sessions. It was expensive but worth it. Then I saw an integrative therapist, with whom I spent nine months dealing with the aftermath of redundancy and other – deeper, unspoken – worries. It wasn't always comfortable or easy, but it certainly helped me to find a happier place.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is suitable treatment for people with anxiety or panic disorders and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). But this is largely because CBT is the style of therapy that has the best research data behind it. Onwelldoing.org, a website I have set up that focuses on mental health, anxiety is the most frequently stated problem by people seeking therapists, and many different types of therapists and counsellors treat people – adolescents and adults – for anxiety and panic disorders. As one therapist told me ironically, "It's anxiety-depression – almost one word, and it's everywhere."

But if weekly therapy sessions are not for you, there are many small changes that can help move the dial on your anxiety. Take time out to relax; learn to breathe through your panic; try mindfulness meditation and don't try to be perfect. Also look at your diet and exercise regime. Clinical psychologist Dr Lynette Roberts at the UTS Graduate School of Health in Sydney said this week, "There is a lot to suggest that imbalances in gut bacteria are linked with changes in mood and behaviour. Studies involving probiotics are already showing they can arrest the thought processes that make people more vulnerable to mood disorders."

Lena Dunham's character in *Girls* struggled with OCD

Exercise is another good defence, often lessening the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol. And that's just what's available now. Last week, at a HealthTechWomenUK event on virtual reality, I tested a headset designed for dealing with OCD, specifically targeting people who were anxious about germs.

I virtually toured the most disgustingly dirty bathroom ever – a germophobe's nightmare. It's much easier to use "exposure" therapy using VR for people affected by OCD or phobias. In this case, it will start to enable them to use public loos, while monitoring their response and finding better ways to help them. And it doesn't come with added odour.

There may be more anxiety about, but we are constantly coming up with new ways to combat it. The important thing is: if you don't deal with it, anxiety can be seriously life-limiting, and that's no fun at all.

Louise Chunn's find a therapist site is welldoing.org